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Different universities, different temporalities: placing the acceleration of academic life in context

A growing body of literature is encouraging academics to slow down their academic work as a way of managing the acceleration of university life. Little attention, however, has been paid to the important differences in temporalities among different sorts of higher education institutions, and the effect this is likely to have upon the sense of acceleration and, crucially, the capacity to resist it. This article discusses interview data with academics at a particularly 'fast' academic site, drawn from a broader comparative study of three very different sorts of institution. It argues that the culture at this university is fundamentally structured around the principle of rapid change, in marked contrast to both more research-intensive *and* more teaching-intensive institutions. Any advice about the management of change must, I argue, take into account the specifics of institutional situations as well as broader structural causes of institutional difference, if it is to prove effective.

Keywords: *slow academia; university cultures; institutional differentiation; anxiety*

Introduction

Advice on how to manage change in academia is ubiquitous. The language of uncertainty and crisis infiltrates even our most everyday discussions of university life, and advice tends to be given in response which stresses resilience, flexibility or mere positivity – in short, while the problems may be structural, any workable response will be at the level of individual (self) management. Compounding this individual focus is the fact that much academic self-help advice makes general pronouncements about what the individual ought to do without addressing itself to the specifics of the conditions in different higher education institutions themselves.

This article seeks to address such specifics by examining the particular conditions at a highly accelerated academic site. My point is not that workers at the university described *cannot* slow down their productivity rates, practise mindfulness, or any of the other suggestions made by the slow academia movement. Rather, it is that the working conditions at their university are simply different from those at other sorts of institution, and that such differences will affect not just a *sense* of temporal control, but *actual* temporal control.

The interview data presented comes from a larger, ongoing study (described below), which examines three case-study English universities occupying very different positions in both formal and informal academic hierarchies. While we should be wary of generalising out from these three cases too far, I would like to argue that positions in such hierarchies had demonstrable effects upon the experience of speed. Observations about the speed of change made by academics at the institution which is in the *middle* of prestige hierarchies often related precisely to the anxious feeling of occupying that middling position.

While staff at all three institutions discussed acceleration of their working lives in multiple ways, the manner in which this was discussed and the centrality it was afforded at the university of middle ranking was notable. While academic acceleration was not the topic of my study it was given prominence here, much more so than at the more and less prestigious institutions. Concomitant with the discussion of speed was one of a deeply anxious culture: change was so rapid and unpredictable that staff had a perpetual feeling of disquiet and agitation, and characterised not just themselves but the institution itself as anxious and unhappy as a result of this pace of change. Again, this is not to say that academics at the other sites did not discuss personal and institutional anxiety as connected to acceleration, and we should be especially careful about romanticising either the oldest institutions as intellectual oases in the marketised maelstrom, or those institutions with the strongest teaching focus as

full of happy-go-lucky Mr Chips characters. Clearly *specific* pressures are felt at these very different sites. My point is that there are a specific set of anxieties which emerge at institutions that occupy a middle position, which is a result of insecurity about *both* teaching and research excellence.

As Roger Brown (2018) has argued recently in this journal, the competition for status which characterises the current English higher education market seems to lead to a series of iniquitous outcomes for students, workers and society at large. Without at least discussing structural issues such as the marketisation of higher education and its consequences, or placing experiences in a specific institutional context, advice on how any individual should manage change is likely to ring hollow.

Slow academia

The slow academia movement is an extension of the slow lifestyle movement into intellectual life. Slow began with the slow food movement, which encourages its practitioners to engage more fully and mindfully with the processes of food production and consumption by supporting local and organic producers and taking more time over meals (Honoré 2004).

From there the idea has extended to include a range of themes, including family life, work and even sex. In 2004 the dean of the undergraduate college at Harvard, Henry Lewis, wrote an open letter to his students entitled ‘Slow down’. The letter rapidly gained internet attention for its suggestion of a relationship to university life which was characterised not by the endless development of new intellectual interests and extracurricular activities pursued for the sake of a CV, but rather by a slower, more discerning attempt to discover a smaller number of interests which would serve as much for personal as for career development (Lewis 2004). From there, applications of the slow movement to university life have been on

the increase, including Agnes Bosanquet's popular Slow Academic blog, and Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber's manifesto *The Slow Professor* (2016). Slow academia invites its adherents to slow down their work, to practise mindfulness when at work, and when not at work – well, not to be at work. It is presented as a strategy for managing the changing temporalities of academic life, including an increased expected rate of publication, shortened periods of time granted to the PhD and other 'self-contained' research projects, and the modularisation of degree structures.

As a number of critical scholars have pointed out, the changing nature of academic time (and any individual strategy for its management) cannot be divorced from broader politics within higher education (Vostal 2016; Martell 2014), including new public management. Without this political concern, slow academia can even be presented as an *aid to productivity*. This is particularly true when it fits within the genre of 'academic self-help'. Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt's (2017) recent "Time in Neoliberal Academia", for instance, and despite an apparently politically engaged title, offers a whole series of suggestions for how *the individual* can manage their time more mindfully. The Great Lakes Feminist Geography Collective's (2015) manifesto, while a highly political criticism of academic acceleration, nonetheless makes clear links between slowdown and productivity: 'Our central point is that this slowing down represents both a commitment to good scholarship *and* a feminist politics of resistance to the accelerated timelines of the neoliberal university' (1238; original emphasis). We might compare the link made between slowdown and 'good scholarship' with corporate claims made for mindfulness in the workplace more generally: stripped of any spiritual or critical meaning, such practices become merely an aid to the smooth running of the organisation.

Probably the seminal work in the slow academia field, Berg and Seeber's *Slow Professor*, is precisely not in this category of highly individualised self-help. Indeed a sizeable portion of the book is spent mocking the academic self-help tome, with its ruthless and sometimes patently absurd hyper-individualism. They discuss, for instance, the advice which is often given to *protect* your time for 'your own work', which in practice often means the delegation of work to professional support staff and junior colleagues. As Meyerhoff and Noterman (2017) also point out, this is an act based on an assessment that different colleagues' time has different values, and that while a particular task may be a good use of *your* time, it is a waste of mine.

Despite their more collective and political relationship to academic time and its management, Berg and Seeber along with many other authors in the slow academia movement, even where they stress the importance of academic speed as political, for the most part fail to acknowledge the often stark differences between *different kinds of institutions*. My point in this paper is that the acceleration of academic life, while experienced by academics at all three institutions included in my research, is experienced differently, indeed has different meanings, and that the capacity to resist it is therefore different in these different contexts.

The study

The data in this article come from semi-structured interviews carried out in summer 2017 with nine academics, ranging from deans of faculty to teaching fellows, at three universities in different regions of England. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then analysed using NVivo software. The broader research project of which it forms a part concerns the emergence over the past fifteen years of US-style liberal arts degrees in English higher education institutions (HEIs). In addition to interviews with academics, the research has

included discourse analysis of the webpages of all HEIs promoting liberal arts degrees (Telling 2018), and forthcoming work includes focus groups and interviews with students and alumni.

Broadly, new liberal arts courses take their inspiration from a North American model of highly interdisciplinary degrees, generally with the humanities at the core, stressing small-group teaching, a holistic pedagogic approach which links intellectual to personal and moral development, and the imparting of generic or soft competences associated with the humanities over technical skills. Liberal arts is a growth area in English higher education, with fifteen HEIs offering the degrees for the 2019-20 academic year (although some new courses are already closing due to poor student recruitment). My very broad questions in the project overall are about the relationship between these degrees and social class, especially classed notions of citizenship and character and how these are said to be instilled through the humanities rather than a more applied or technical education.

Though I am clearly concerned about the relationship between these new degrees and social class, this is not to say that they are only emerging at elite universities. They exist at civic, post-war and post-1992 institutions throughout the country. Clearly they serve different functions in these different contexts, ranging from high-status flagship degrees attracting large numbers of international students, to very small-scale offerings largely designed to boost numbers for under-recruiting departments at very real risk of closure. We should be wary then of understanding apparently similar institutional strategies as evidence of mission drift. As any number of studies show, most recently the Paired Peers project in Bristol (Bathmaker et al. 2016), the massification of higher education has hardly resulted in the homogenisation of institutions. Croxford and Raffae (2015) have also demonstrated

quantitatively that even controlling for prior attainment, the socioeconomic status of student intake maps very neatly onto traditional hierarchies of prestige.

In my liberal arts project I therefore look at three very different HEIs. What I will refer to as Old University is a medium-sized civic institution that received its royal charter in the early twentieth century, and is located centrally in a large, prosperous city. Post-War University is a small institution on the edge of a medium-sized, prosperous satellite town, receiving its charter in the 1960s in the wake of the Robbins report. And New University is a small former technical college on the periphery of a small, post-industrial city, which gained university status following the 1992 reforms. The institutions are located in different regions of England.

As Brown and Scase (1994) demonstrated nearly twenty-five years ago, in the context of a rapidly massifying higher education system there is value in finding some middle ground between the depth of individual institutional case studies and the breadth of more policy-oriented, whole-sector reviews. Three well-chosen institutions, like those which Brown and Scase selected for their study of changes in the graduate labour market during massification, can be constructed as case studies which demonstrate both what is generally true and what is institutionally specific across the sector. Three institutions cannot, however, represent the entire range of higher education providers across England, and notable by their absence are small specialist institutions, further education colleges providing higher education, private providers, and any representative of the federated University of London.

It is also too simplistic to imagine that the small number of interviewees here are representative of their respective institutions without qualification. Rather, I argue that striking similarities between my participants at one of the institutions (Post-War) tell us something about the specifics of that institution. Since the participants themselves alluded to

this specificity when comparing their own institution to others, I take this to be indicative of a *shared feeling* about institutional culture amongst staff on a particular degree, rather than an objective description of the institution itself.

Results and discussion

In my interviews with academics at the three universities, there were of course stark differences in conceptions of time as well as objective differences in the actual amount of time available for different tasks. For instance, when initially planning their liberal arts degree the programme director at Old University told me about a leisurely trip with her vice-chancellor to visit a number of private liberal arts colleges in New England, where they were ‘wined and dined.’ The reconnaissance of the programme director at New University, by contrast, essentially involved internet searching.

While there were a number of interesting differences between the institutions in relation to time, then, here I will focus on Post-War University, because I think its fraught position *in the middle* of prestige hierarchies has much to tell us about the speeding up of academic life. Those at Post-War felt they were at the coalface of neoliberal drives, including often quite illogical rule by metrics and often quite petty micro-management.

The liberal arts degree at Post-War has now been taken off the books after running for just two years. A huge amount of intellectual, not to mention emotional, work had been put into designing the degree; but while the people involved in that work agreed with me that this was a rapid about-face, the *principle* that degrees should open and close with some alacrity was treated as par for the course. As one lecturer told me:

For an undergraduate programme, yeah, that's a very short time. That's probably the shortest I've seen. But master's programmes come and go like nobody's business.

[...] The University is, I think like other universities, it's prepared to let units try things out in terms of – you know, you've got to make a case that there's a market – but if you're not really up and running and looking like you're hitting the targets in a couple of years then questions start being asked.

While this academic notes that his institution's approach is 'like other universities,' by contrast the programme director at Old told me that, 'It's not that easy to just set up a new degree programme,' and that because of the glacial speed of the relevant committees, they had been dashed in their hopes to be the first liberal arts degree at a public HEI in England.

The degree at Post-War was shut down due to concerns about student numbers. An institution's relationship to student numbers can be interpreted in one way as an institution's relationship *to its students*, and individuals at each of the three HEIs talked in starkly different terms about this. At New, there is no cap on student numbers on any module, and lecturers seemed happy to see their modules grow as Liberal Arts and other combined studies students took them up as options. In fact Liberal Arts itself is a very small cohort, but the small numbers were discussed in terms of strong cohort identity and intimate pedagogic methods on core modules.

At Old, there was a more or less constant panic that there would be *too many students*.

Students were at times talked about as external forces infiltrating the university, and student numbers as in danger of creeping up unless vigilance was maintained. An apparent planning miscalculation in the central office last year had meant that a larger number of students had met the grades of their conditional offers than had been expected. In reference to the extra thirteen students this meant they received, a teaching fellow told me:

It was a bit of a shock. [...] We got through it, and the incoming director of Liberal Arts, I don't know if she was supposed to but she took on personal tutees for Liberal Arts. That kind of eased the workload a little bit. So we survived.

At Post-War there was continual reference to student numbers and hyper-vigilance about relatively small movements within them. From small beginnings, the Liberal Arts numbers actually tripled over the degree's very short lifespan, but since initial planning had hoped for twenty students and they were now at eighteen, the degree was closed after two years. The individual who had largely designed the degree put this in the context of a whole raft of combined degrees that had also been culled at around the same time, always on the basis of, as he told me, two and a half years' student recruitment data. While this was presented to me by the then executive dean of arts and human sciences as a strategy driven by data and a hard-headed business orientation, it seemed to fit into a more general short-termist and even haphazard approach to planning alluded to by other participants at Post-War. The *future* for everyone I talked to here, including the dean, seemed completely unknowable. The best that could be done was to remedy decisions already taken, but only ever by looking at the very immediate past. They were trapped in a perpetual present: institutional memory was extremely short, compounded by a high turnover of professional support and academic staff, and any memory there was did not seem able to inform future planning.

In the course of less than five years the average tariff across Post-War has increased from BBC to AAB. In this sense, and from a senior management perspective, the strategy of rapid change and top-down decision-making could be called a 'success'. Yet the repercussions are clearly to be seen not only in the high turnover of staff but in a much more general sense of anxiety. The former programme director of Liberal Arts at Post-War, who had put a great

deal of work into the degree only to have it closed after two years, had been at the institution for fourteen years and, as he told me:

When I arrived this university was a very different university. It was very provincial; it was dare I say sleepy. You know, people did stuff: if they didn't do stuff it was fine. And we then got a new vice-chancellor in.

While, like everyone else I spoke to at Post-War, he pinpoints the entrance on the scene of the former vice-chancellor in the mid-2000s as a key turning point in the university's successes as well as its anxieties, he later describes the aspirational culture at Post-War as preceding this:

Post-War's always put a great faith in metrics, KPIs. We had a long phase where – well we still do but less aggressively – where senior – so deputy vice-chancellors would come round with annual targets on research, on learning and teaching, pointing out problems to everybody so that everybody knows what is what and that the University is watching and paying interest in these kind of things.

In his fourteen years at Post-War, this lecturer had seen ten reshuffles of departments or changes of school structure.¹

The teaching fellow at Post-War insightfully diagnosed the anxious culture as connected to a generally *middling, or even mediocre, reputation*, despite the marked successes the university had had in recent years in metrics of both teaching and research:

I think Post-War's had a little bit of trouble with the whole wanting to be 'University of...'. I don't think they're really gone one way or another. [...] They can't even drop the teaching standard to LSE or people like that, you know? But they like to think that

they could knock on the door with their research. Which relatively they're not really but you know.

This use of a very elite institution, LSE, as a reference point contrasted interestingly with a similar point made by the dean. While the dean cited elite institutions approvingly as real competitors as well as obvious successes to emulate, the teaching fellow was more ambivalent, characterising such universities as a byword for both excellent research and relatively poor teaching. When I pushed her to pinpoint precisely where this aspirational desire was coming from she apologised for being unable to, instead describing it as an 'institutional mentality' specific to Post-War, and as something 'in the air.'

While all participants I spoke to at Post-War apart from the dean felt troubled by this anxious culture and found it to be often unhelpful for the development of their own work, there was a complex simultaneous admiration for the way that it appeared to have 'got results', and an ambivalent internalisation of the culture of speed and rapid change, and even of its connection to metrics. One told me:

But also I think one of the things that's interesting is that people still have an awareness that the job should never be done, that we should always keep on looking at what we're doing. So I think there is much more awareness that you can't rest on laurels. And I've seen very successful bits of the University that, even though they've got very good evaluation of their teaching and good NSS figures, still kind of reinventing what they do to make sure they keep on at the front, you know.

We could understand this ambivalent attitude toward rapid change in the context of a much broader expectation that the ideal late-modern worker be resilient and flexible in the face of more or less constant workplace flux (Martin 2000).

Despite the internalisation of the culture of speed demonstrated here, and in contrast to the programme director at New University who told me he couldn't imagine working anywhere else, everyone I talked to at Post-War apart from the dean was considering leaving the institution. Asking one whether there was anything Post-War could do to get her to stay, she responded, after an extremely long pause: 'No.'

Conclusion

In focusing on the acceleration and concomitant anxieties associated with this post-war HEI I am in danger of slipping into the nostalgia for universities 'before neoliberalism' which feeds into much work in the slow academia vein. Higher education was built upon the backs of the disadvantaged, and paid for by colonialism and the worst exploitations of industrial capitalism – to look backward to a time 'before neoliberalism' hardly seems progressive in this context. Indeed it is easy to move from nostalgia for a time before neoliberalism to nostalgia for a time before massification, when there was more time precisely because there were fewer students. Some HEIs, in their general institutional cultures and specifically in their student recruitment strategies, remain much closer to this past than others.

Rather, my intention in focusing on Post-War has been to show the difference that institutional conditions make to the experience of speed and to individuals' feelings of control, and the capacity – or even the will – to resist. As Dick Pels (2003) has argued in his study *Unhastening Science*, academic autonomy from the concerns of politics or of the economy is not an abstract principle to be understood in absolutist terms, but rather a compromise which has been struggled over in specific historical conditions. As such the degree of autonomy I can claim will always be contingent upon my situation – what type of contract I have, what discipline I occupy, the competing institutional roles I have and,

crucially, the type of institution I find myself in. I cannot claim academic autonomy ‘as such,’ but must instead negotiate for it in the context of my specific situation.

Similarly, as a strategy for managing change in higher education, the advice to slow down should only be given as a specific response to a specific situation. Within some institutional cultures, such as the one at Post-War described here, rapid change is perhaps the structuring principle of the university: to slow down in this context is a completely different business from slowing down in a redbrick or teaching-intensive site. If, as a number of writers have argued, the slow movement must advance a collective rather than an individual approach in order to avoid depoliticisation, then a key aspect of this should be the recognition that institutional cultures are different, and that in some highly fraught academic sites, slowing down may be nigh-on impossible.

¹ As John Hogan (2012) points out in his work on the increasing occurrence of academic restructuring since 1993, it is too simplistic to attribute all such changes to the self-asserting caprice of new vice-chancellors (even if such change is often coterminous with a new individual taking up the senior position). The increasing popularity of academic restructuring should be placed within the context of, as Hogan also notes, the strengthening of a middle stratum of faculty-level management between schools and the centre. Hogan’s sense that there is not enough evidence to determine how successful academic restructures are in terms of the stated aim of more efficient resource-allocation, however, rather evades the question of how such efficiency could be measured in a sector which does not produce a product or provide an easily measurable service (at least without the development of increasingly tenuous proxies – see Lorenz 2012).

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